

CLOSURES AND UNCERTAINTY ARE “WORSE THAN KATRINA”

Bayou la Batre, Alabama,
and Biloxi, Mississippi



I BEGIN MY TRIP in Bayou la Batre, Alabama, and Biloxi, Mississippi. Forty-five miles apart, both communities depend on shrimp for economic survival. And both were walloped by Hurricane Katrina five years ago.

In Bayou la Batre, beached shrimp boats, boarded-up businesses, and rotting shells of houses are everywhere. In Biloxi, there are open fields where in-town neighborhoods used to be. Now, citizens of the two towns watch as the largest oil spill in American history guts their livelihoods and threatens their way of life again.

2010 should have been their comeback year. Infrastructure was adequate, the long winter had nurtured a bumper shrimp crop, and prices were up. “It was looking like it was going to be a pretty profitable year, like it was ten or twelve years ago,” explains Frank Parker, thirty-seven, a sixth-generation Biloxi shrimper. Instead, almost all of the waters off of eastern Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama are closed to fishing. “It’s pretty bad,” says Frank. “It’s a real uncertain future for the industry. It’s a real uncertain future for the whole Gulf of Mexico.”

IN THE WORKING-CLASS community of Bayou La Batre, nearly everyone I meet has been a fisherman or shrimper at one time, or is related to someone who was. But on the first day of my visit, I hear multiple times that it’s become “impossible” to make a living harvesting seafood. High fuel prices and the easy availability of cheap imports have long meant—even before the oil spread like a pall across the water—that fewer American shrimp were gracing American dinner tables.

ABOVE: Mai Van Nguyen, a shrimper and Southeast Asian immigrant, was one of only two selling product to Sea Pearl Seafood Company in Bayou La Batre on June 21.

Many locals believe that the emotional and economic toll of this oil spill will exceed that of the hurricane of the century. “After Katrina, we lost everything, but we were back in business in three weeks,” explains Michael Ladnier, who has been in the seafood-packaging business in Bayou La Batre for forty-one years. Michael says that since the spill, his business is off nearly eighty percent. Nobody needs seafood packaging if no seafood is being caught.

IN BILOXI, business prospects are similarly bleak. I discover as much at Gollott Seafood Company, a shrimp-processing company here. Owner Richard Gollott, sixty-six, has one of the more upbeat tones in town, even though his business has screeched to a halt. Before Hurricane Katrina, the company was buying shrimp off of more than one hundred shrimp boats. After Katrina, it took him four years to get back to about fifty boats. This June, that number is down to three.

“If you let it, it’ll depress you, because you don’t know what’s going to happen tomorrow,” Richard admits. “But I’m optimistic about them getting the well capped.”

The busiest season for Richard’s employees should be right

now. "This is the time of year when they would make their money," he explains. "They usually work seventy to eighty hours a week." As of early July, his fifty employees were working about twenty hours a week. According to Richard, BP has "stepped up to the plate" by paying claims to some workers and businesses hurt by the spill, including Gollott Seafood Company. Still, it is unclear how many of the hourly workers in the area have received payments.

MANY OF THE hourly workers in the shrimp plants and oyster-shucking houses around here are immigrants from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. Together, they make up about a third of the population of Bayou la Batre and its surrounding areas.

They began coming to the U.S. in the mid-1970s as refugees fleeing war and political turmoil, and flocked to the Gulf fishing communities because this is the work they knew. Once here, they sought grueling jobs shucking oysters and heading shrimp. They were, according to Richard Gollott, willing to work longer hours than any of the locals at the time. "I think they saved the shrimping industry on the Mississippi Gulf Coast," Richard argues. A generation has gone by, and the Southeast Asian population is now part of the local fabric of most fishing communities between New Orleans and Mobile Bay.

Boat People SOS, a national nonprofit working in Vietnamese-American communities, operates a branch in Bayou La Batre. Earlier this spring, BPS OS was hosting financial literacy classes and English-as-a-Second-Language training. Community building, not crisis management, was their focus.

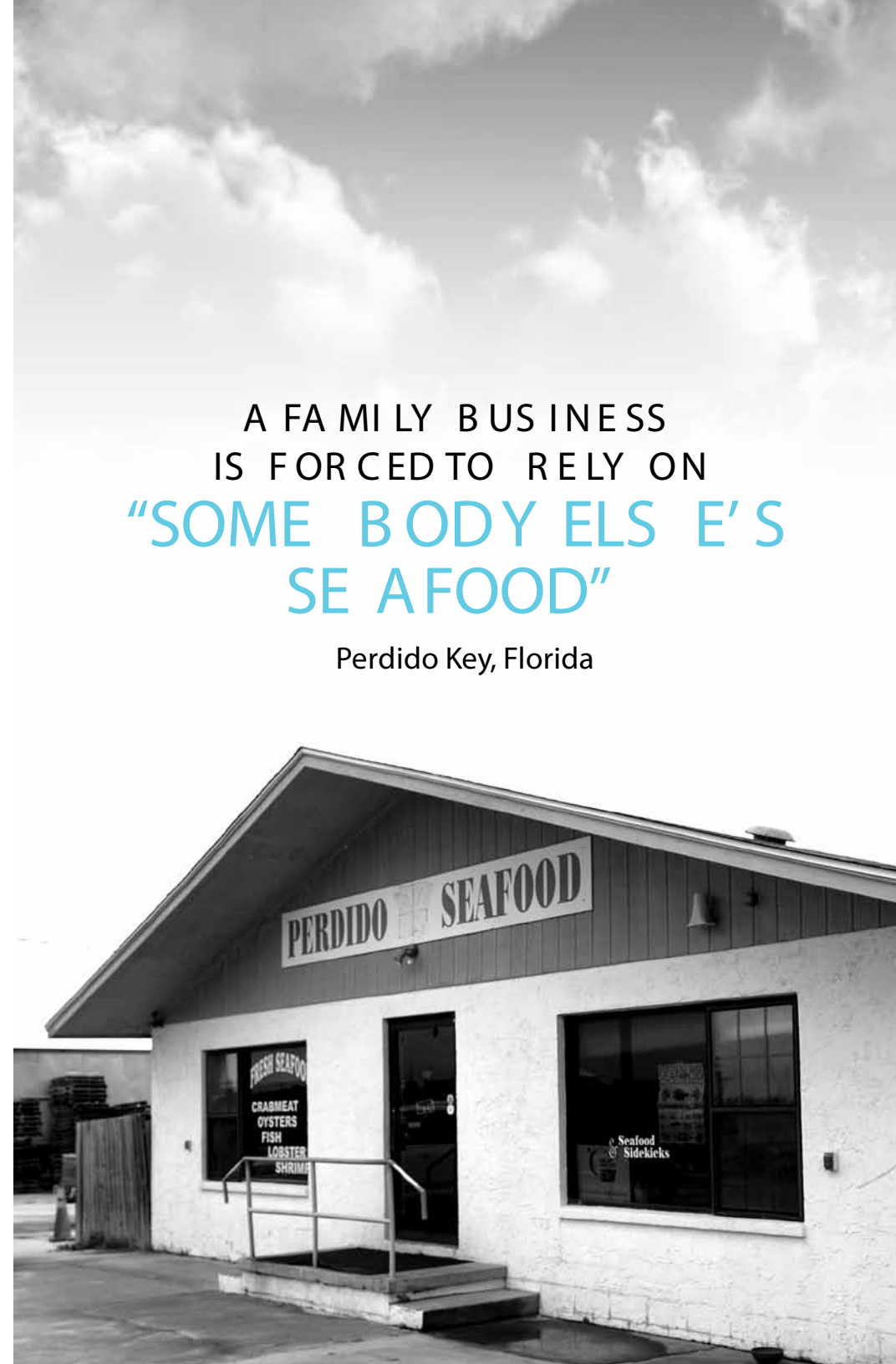
Since the spill, demand for their services has spiked. Now they help career oyster shuckers and shrimp packagers apply for food stamps, unemployment, and BP claims. They've also established a food bank, because many seafood workers are going hungry.

DREAD HANGS in the air here. Grown men and women will occasionally tear up in frustration. But mostly people just shake their heads. Speaking with Michael Ladnier, I offer condolences for his family's hardships. He cuts me off.

"We'll overcome it. Somehow we will," Michael says quickly. I swear I hear him smile as he says this last part: "We're resilient." Like many folks around here, I think he's had to say that before.

A FAMILY BUSINESS IS FORCED TO RELY ON "SOME BODY ELSE'S SEAFOOD"

Perdido Key, Florida



THEIR LAST BOATS of fresh Gulf seafood unloaded on June 1, exactly six weeks after the Deepwater Horizon oil rig blew up. “ We filmed it,” says Joy Hatfield, one of the owners of Perdido Bay Seafood, on the western fringe of Pensacola.

“We took a bunch of pictures. We were all sad because we knew that was probably it for a while,” explains Teresa Fagan, Joy’s granddaughter. Twenty-nine-year-old Teresa says she’s been working in the family business “since I was in the womb, practically.”



ABOVE: Teresa Fagan and her grandmother Joy Hatfield are accustomed to selling fish from their own boats.

PREVIOUS PAGE: Perdido Bay Seafood’s storefront is located about a mile east of the Alabama state line.

Joy opened Perdido Bay Seafood with her husband and their son in November of 1988. Since then, it’s been a thriving wholesale and retail operation. Until this spring, eight deep-sea boats, two of which the Hatfield family owns, have fished exclusively for them. Teresa believes that her family’s sea-to-storefront ethic is what sets them apart. Their customers can see the fresh fish coming right off the water and into the back door of the shop.

“We’re not like other places,” Teresa says. Then she corrects herself. “ Well, now we’re like other places. Now we get our fish from somebody else.” She shakes her head. “It’s ridiculous. It’s embarrassing.”

The deep-sea area they’ve always fished—the region that provided them with bountiful harvests of grouper, cobia, snapper, and triggerfish—is about ninety miles off the coast of Alabama and Mississippi, according to Teresa.

The federal government closed it to all fishing in the last days of May. In theory, the company’s boats could navigate around the closed areas to the open ones east and southwest of here. But that detour would add two days to each end of the trip, making it financially untenable.

The retail store has product for sale—fish bought from suppliers farther east of here in Florida, and oysters shipped from Galveston Bay, Texas, four hundred fifty miles away. But the selection is skimpy. Sales have skidded from \$8,000 to \$2,000 a week. On a normal summer afternoon, five employees would be working feverishly behind the counter. But on June 28, two of the four workers present were changing light bulbs.

IN ADDITION to the storefront, Perdido Bay Seafood was also a thriving wholesale operation, selling frozen whole fish to brokers in Atlanta, New York, and elsewhere. But because they can no longer fish, that side of the business is closed indefinitely.

While sales are failing, speculation is thriving. There is no official word on when any of the waters will reopen, but Teresa and Joy hear rumors constantly. Some say a portion of the waters could be fished as early as this fall. Others guess it could take ten or more years before the federal government permits fishing here. As it is for so many who make their living in the Gulf seafood industry, the future is a depressing mystery.

In the weeks between the oil rig explosion on April 20 and the water closure on June 1, business at Perdido Bay was tremendous. “It was like the Fourth of July”—one of their busiest times of the year—Joy says. The regular customers were stockpiling. People were buying shrimp to freeze for weddings in the fall. “ They thought it was going to be the last they were going to get,” Teresa says.

When I ask Joy if the family has its own seafood stash hidden in a freezer somewhere, she looks at me mildly and says no, as if she hadn’t thought of it. “I don’t know,” she says. “ Your heart just isn’t in it, I guess.”